

A Radical Rewiring

It can be difficult for people to believe the extent to which the mind can be transformed by spiritual practice. One reason for this is that many see the brain as the seat of the mind and since it is taken for true that you cannot transform the brain to a large extent, then how could you ever transform the mind? There have been a number of responses to this. First of all modern neurology has shown there to be more flexibility or plasticity in the nervous system than we had previously thought. This encourages us to believe that it is possible to make substantial and lasting changes. There are many different neural channels through which information can pass. The more we use one of these the more established that route becomes. So we see a neural basis for our mental karma.

There is also the general level of activity of the whole system. Often we are less aware of this dimension and instead get drawn into the specific content of the mind, which makes us miss the wood for the trees, so to speak; but in focusing on the overall level of activity, instead of focusing on particulars, we achieve a massive modification in our experience.

In addition to any change of the system there is also the possibility of the same system coming under a new master or being superseded in some way. We can certainly see the hierarchical structure of the nervous system with different sections placed one above the other. So it is reasonable to suggest that reason can dominate (isn't it just!) by some kind of super cortex. A more radical and perhaps more joyful revolution would occur, however, if the lower, simply pleasure-seeking, parts of the system came under more control or even under a different control. The first is surely possible through long-term self discipline – if this happens in a good way, and has heart as well as head. The second can happen when we find a different source of pleasure through the spiritual life. *Samādhi* is the most potent of these. There is growing evidence that *samādhi* has a radical effect on our neural patterns, both in terms of overall level of activity and in terms of specifics.

Let us consider how this can be. Although pleasure is very important – it is the motivator of the mind and heart – there is more to the cultivation of *samādhi* than just pleasure. It shows us a way to establish a different relationship between our minds and the world. Buddhist psychology first of all sees the mind as conditioned by our sensory contact with the world; it sees an open system, integrated into the world. Secondly it sees the mind as a sixth sense both channeled through the other five and having its own sense.

Buddhism sees it like this because we discover that when the mind withdraws from the senses then all thought and imagination ceases so that we clearly see our inner world as dependent, moment by moment, on the other senses. It is in this that there is the greatest potential transformation, not just in terms of content but in terms of how the whole system operates.

If we experience imagination, dreams and memory as part of the senses, then we see how the untrained mind is continuously caught up in them. It is never at rest, always out there in the 'real' world or in one of its own creations associated with it. If we have ever managed to let go of the senses (even to some degree) and thereby entered

samādhi, even if only momentarily, this situation is changed forever. As well as being a new source of pleasure, *samādhi* also offers us the possibility of a liberating wisdom and compassion. The mind has found another abiding from which it gains a new perspective on the world, it has also thus discovered a kind of sense of its own, independent of the other five. Our way of experiencing the world changes in its balance from a situation where the outside generates the inside through sense impressions, to a situation where the inside reaches out into the world as the peace inside fills the senses.

This is also very significant because it means that the process of perception can come under conscious influence. We might become able to have much more choice over how we see things and this can change how we feel about life and the world overall.

Let us take the radical example of sexual desire. This is almost universally seen as hard-wired into the system; and since we are so tightly identified with our desires it is a very radical, and also a very rare, thing to see that this alleged hard-wiring is not the case – it can be so radical that it completely transforms our view of who or what we are. If we live the celibate life (and it's not that I am expecting everyone to be interested in this particular practice) we are not acting on this desire but rather trying to get beyond it, seeing it as that which ties us to the realm of birth and death.

The mechanisms by which desire occurs have therefore, throughout the age-long tradition of spiritual practitioners, been carefully examined. What we discover is that in every case the desire needs to be triggered by a perception. All other factors are secondary. Actually, the spiritual practitioner will recognize many secondary factors that make the physical reaction of desire stronger or less strong as it arises. This strength will be determined by the amount of karma we have made, this we will need to endure through our attempt to reverse the process. There are factors in our current lifestyle, and many yogic systems work with these, diet is one good example. The ultimate way past desire is none of these, however, but lies in a change in perception.

The main reason why we do not see the significance of perception is that we regard mental images as essentially different from the real thing, as essentially different from the objects of desire out there in the world. **So when mental images arise they are taken to represent the desire itself when this is not the case.** A mind calmed through meditation that is not simply reacting to these images will see that **when a mental image arises it can be seen as attractive or unattractive in the same way as an outer image and then desire will arise or not arise.**

It is then realized that if it is possible to change the perception of the body permanently, sexual desire will not arise. This may not sound very attractive in itself but what we also discover is that freedom from desire is actually a very blissful state of mind. Anyone who has experienced it will never want to want anything ever again! This change of perception takes a long time and a lot of effort to achieve but it is worth striving for.

To widen the scope of this example a little, modern cognitive science is showing how influential images are in our thought processes, how our minds seem to hinge more on picturing than on verbal reasoning. This fits very well with the experience of the meditator. Also, the body is very much a part of this system, our minds are very much

embodied. Our perception of the body is therefore a very important aspect to almost all our thought processes and not just sensual thoughts. So a change in this perception can have a very radical effect on our lives – and brains.

I offer this for your reflection.

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